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Goodwill Nkosingathi Matsenjwa

Estella Musiiwa

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The Globalization of the Rural Swazi Weaver: Lavumisa Women in the Commercial Handicraft Industry, 1981- 2013

By Goodwill Nkosingathi Matsenjwa¹ and Estella Musiiwa²

Abstract

From the Women and Development (WAD) theory perspective, this study explores the development of women's handicraft industry in Lavumisa, a drought prone area in southeastern Swaziland. Women-dominated handicraft production in Lavumisa occurred within the context of land alienation and male labour migration under colonialism, and later, economic and HIV related problems in post-colonial Swaziland. State controlled marketing of handicraft started in 1962. The prevalence of faith-based non-governmental organizations and the United States Peace Corps during the 1980s witnessed the introduction of women's group handicraft production as well as the expansion of the handicraft industry. Meanwhile, the economic recession of the 1990s and the HIV related social problems culminated in the increase in female-headed households. The resultant socio-economic problems saw Gone Rural, a women- oriented Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), taking centre stage in facilitating handicraft production through the provision of raw material, training facilities, new international designs and international marketing facilities for the craft wares. Not only were the Lavumisa women incorporated into the international commercial "mass craft"; they experienced a socio-economic transformation where they became household breadwinners and constituted a women's petty bourgeois class within their community.

Keywords: Handicraft, Basketry, Women, Gone Rural, Lavumisa, Swaziland

Introduction

In general, "handicraft" refers to hand- made items. For purposes of this paper, essential handicraft refers to handicraft produced for personal use and not for sale. Commercial handicraft is produced for sale for cash returns for the benefit of the producer. Rural handicraft refers to handicraft produced in the rural or communal areas, while African handicraft refers to handicraft that produced in Africa.

From time immemorial Swazi women and men produced essential handicraft on a small scale for domestic use and for trading in their villages. Swazi women and men produced products at a small scale for domestic use and for trading in their villages. They produced wares like sleeping grass mats, grass brooms, pottery, sisal dishes, bead work, and baskets which were produced mostly by women. These products were designed by the women without western formal training.³ The original creativity reflected in the designs of their craftsmanship was embedded in their

¹ University Swaziland Kwaluseni Campus History Department Email: goodwillmats@gmail.com

² University Swaziland Kwaluseni Campus History Department Email: tmusiiwa@uniswa.sz

³ M Elizabeth Terry takes note of a similar experience among the Tswana women who dominated pre colonial basketry handicraft. They produced different shapes and sizes of baskets for soring, winnowing, carriage, straining and other uses (M Elizabeth Terry (2001), "An Overview of the Botswana handicraft sector", Botswana Notes and Records, (33), 129- 143).

political, economic and social culture. Such Swazi culturally derived handicrafts were transformed with the development of the sub- regional capitalist economy. Gender differences in the focus on commercial handicraft started with colonization. Male labour migration for low- wage employment called for the women left behind to look to alternative means of making a living. In drier parts of Swaziland characterized by massive migration of men, commercial handicraft production became a viable source of income for women.

Women in commercial handicraft in Africa have received attention from scholars who emphasize the economic benefits of rural handicraft. Melinda Ebert (1977) highlights the economic value of basketry among the Basarwa men and women in Botswana. Jonathan Stockland (1978) focuses on Benin women crafters who benefited from commercial handicraft. Rhoda Livinsohn (1980) emphasizes not only the socio- economic value of craft production among the Kwazulu women, but also the resilience of their traditional skills in commercial handicraft. Similarly, Richard Roberts (1984) demonstrates the socio- economic importance of craft production among the Maraka women in Middle Niger. Terry and Cunningham's (1993) focus on basketry in Southern Africa reveals that basketry in the drought prone Karirangwe (Zimbabwe) constituted the major source of income. Likewise, Konstant, T.L.S. Sullivan and A.B Cunningham (1995) demonstrate that basketry in the former Owambo region of Northern Namibia provided women with the means of generating income. Focusing on the technical aspects of handicraft, Terry (2000) reflects on the amount of human and financial resources that kept the Botswana craft sector going. Terry (2001) demonstrates the broad characteristics of Botswana's handicraft producers, products, raw materials, and marketing structures. Michael Lee Yoffe (1978), Gerard Darwin (1975) and Richard Roberts (1987) note that the globalization of handicraft either destroyed African handicraft as an industry, or technically destroyed creativity and originality in the African handicraft coiling and weaving patterns. There are scholars who have highlighted the role of women in handicraft production in other parts of the world. For instance, Little (2004 and 2005) draws a link between political activism and tourist handicraft among the Maya in Central America. Against the backdrop of the existing scholarly works on commercial handicraft, this study traces changes over time in the development of women's commercial handicraft in Lavumisa.

This study explores the development of women's commercial handicraft industry in Lavumisa from small scale domestic producers to large scale commercialized production. Since women's commercial handicraft industry in Lavumisa was established specifically for women, it is appropriate to study women's handicraft in Lavumisa within the context of the "women and development (WAD)" theory because "women have always been important economic actors in their societies..." (Rathberger, 1990; 489). A study of women's handicraft from a historical perspective allows an appreciation of change over time in the way women have participated in commercial handicraft production within the context of global and national economic changes.

The Internationalisation of Commercial Handicraft in Swaziland, 1962- 1980

Swazi women and men were involved in essential handicraft production as part of their culture but production for international markets started during the 1960s. The viability of handicraft production as an international economic activity in Swaziland should be appreciated within the context of international and national calls for modernization and development discourse of the 1960s. The colonial state was anxious to curb nationalist activities by raising the living standards for Africans through various 'development' projects. That was the time when

international handicraft markets were expanding, hence the opportunity for Swaziland to produce handicrafts for the local as well as the emerging international market.

The internationalisation of state controlled handicraft marketing started in 1962 when the government set up handicraft stalls in Mbabane, Manzini and Piggs Peak which catered for handicraft supplied by individual Swazis and Government-sponsored women's clubs.⁴ The increase in the production of handicraft in Swaziland resulted in the formation of a formal commercialized structure to facilitate the exportation of Swazi craft. The National Handicraft Organization (NHO) was established in 1967. Thereafter, the Small Enterprises Development Co. LTD (SEDCO) and Swazi Craft Limited were set up in 1970 to cater for the marketing of handicrafts. Designed to promote economic development by providing employment opportunities through ownership of industrial enterprises, the small enterprises considered improvement of the quality and design of handicraft. Overseas markets were developed to promote sales of Swazi handicrafts.⁵ In the capital city, Mbabane, there were about sixty handicraft stalls of which only six were owned by men.⁶ Handicraft Associations were established in each of the four regions of Swaziland. It was not until 1975 that King Sobhuza II established the Mantenga National Handicraft Centre to assist with the international marketing of Swazi handicraft. By 1980 the state had promoted handicraft production and marketing in a big way. However, it did not cater for all the handicraft producers, including handicrafters in Lavumisa.

The Establishment of Lavumisa Women's Group Handicraft, 1981-1993

Handicraft production turned out to be the most viable economic activity for women in Lavumisa.⁷ To counter the economic problems that emanated from male labour migration, women engaged in a variety of informal activities. Lavumisa women demonstrated their agency by taking to handicraft production using available natural as well as exotic resources. Knowledge on handicraft production was shared among women as some of the skills were taught to friends and relatives.⁸ Ester Mngomezulu, for instance, explained that she learned how to weave from her mother in 1972.⁹ Marketing of handicraft locally and within the sub-region was done on an individual basis. Some of the handicraft was sold in urban areas in Swaziland to individuals for their own use, but the bulk of the handicraft was sold to traders for resell in South Africa and Mozambique.¹⁰

The establishment of the Thessalonica Zion Church among the Mdlebeni people in Lavumisa in 1980 marked the beginning of a women's group handicraft in that area.¹¹ The first group of seven women handicraft producers in Lavumisa started in 1981.¹² The expansion of group handicraft was facilitated by the Swaziland Council of Churches who had interest in establishing programs that would make "women to begin to see themselves as something more than just

⁴ SNA, File No. 162/2A, Reports for the year 1962.

⁵ Draft for the Swaziland Development Plan, 1968/73.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lisbeth Loughran and Jan Argo, Assessment of handicraft training needs for rural women in Swaziland, *Swaziland Manpower Development project occasional papers*, No.1, July 1986.

⁸ Interview with Ester Mngomezulu, , Lavumisa 1, 13 June 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview with Philemon Matsebula, Thessalonica church , Lavumisa, 15 August 2013.

¹² Interview with Mumci Shabangu, Lavumisa 1, 15 August 2013.

appendages of men or anything that negates their very being.”¹³ In 1984, the Council of Swaziland Churches, in collaboration with the United States embassy in Swaziland and the Government of Swaziland, sent Bill Watson, a Peace Corp from the United States of America to help the people of Lavumisa to establish income- generating projects.¹⁴

Watson introduced commercial handicraft production as one of the income- generating projects.¹⁵ He advised the group to find someone to train them on handicraft production for international markets.¹⁶ In 1985, the group, with a membership of thirty- five women, identified a Mantenga Craft sales lady, Girly Mabuza, who had gained experience in handicraft production for the international market. She organized a group of women who conducted training on weaving sisal products.¹⁷ Even though they did not have a vibrant market at that time, the little they earned from the sales enabled them to make contributions towards their water project which was E3.00 (US25 cents) per month per homestead.¹⁸ Some of the craft products were sold to individual Peace Corps at the Mountain Inn in Mbabane.¹⁹ Women’s group handicraft marketing in Lavumisa had started to penetrate the international market at the initiative of the women. In 1986 Girly Mabuza found a market for the members of the Lavumisa craft producers at Mantenga Craft.²⁰ The Mantenga craft resold the craft in the United Kingdom, Germany and Singapore. However, the women were unhappy with the low prices offered by Mantenga Craft. They considered selling their products to individual Peace Corps and tourists. Larger sales also depended on national events like the Reed Dance (*Umhlanga*) and First Fruits (*Incwala*) ceremonies which attracted tourists into the country.²¹

In order to produce for the international market, the Lavumisa women were encouraged to undergo further training in handicraft production. Two of the women who went to Zimbabwe for training in commercial handicraft production returned with Mrs. Harris who was interested in the Lavumisa handicrafts. She was fascinated by the designs of the different products and suggested that one of the Lavumisa producers meet other producers in the United States of America (USA) to share experiences and ideas on commercial handicraft production. In 1990, Mumcy Shabangu attended a handicraft production course in the USA from where she brought new handicraft production skills. In the meantime, there was conflict over the production and selling of the wares which resulted in the split of the group. Between 1992 and 1994 Lavumisa women continued to produce and market handicraft, but on an individual basis.

¹³ Council of Swaziland Churches, Annual Report, 1984/1985.

¹⁴ United States Peace Corps in Swaziland, <http://Swaziland.peacecorps.gov/about pc.php>. (Accessed 06 Nov 2013).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview with Mumcy Shabangu.

¹⁷ Interview with Happy Gina,, Lavumisa 1, 11 September 2013.

¹⁸ Interview with Mumcy Shabangu.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ A Jeet S. Kanwal, Project for Reorganization of Handicrafts Industry In Swaziland, Report for the Ministry of Commerce and Cooperatives, Department of Handicraft, Mbabane December 1976.

²¹ Interview with Mumcy Shabangu.

“Masscraft” Globalization²²: Gone Rural and the Lavumisa 1 (Ntibane) Basketry, 1994-1999

At the time that the women found a market through Mrs. Forbes, the Lutheran Church found another market through Jenny Thorne who had registered a women’s handicraft company, Gone Rural. The mission for Gone Rural was:

To improve the daily lives of rural Swazi women and their communities by creating a sustainable home based income with traditional hand skills to produce unique, beautiful products using locally available and sustainable natural materials. Through ongoing design input, active marketing strategies, committed leadership, integrity, compassion and standards of excellence, rural women are assisted in achieving their highest potential. Gone Rural is committed to promoting an understanding and respect of Swazi cultural heritage and tradition.²³

In 1994 Thorne agreed to market products for the small group made up of seven women. Gone Rural named the Ntibane handicraft women’s group, Lavumisa 1. The Lavumisa 1 group was tasked to specialize in basketry. Not only did the women find an international market; they were also introduced to a new form of raw material the *lutindzi* grass (*coelestria setifera*), a naturally durable fibrous grass found on the mountains of Swaziland. Thorne recommended the use of the *lutindzi* grass because it had three advantages. First, it was naturally sustainable such that it did not threaten the environment. Second, it was a renewable resource that could be recycled and used to make other products. Third, the use of *lutindzi* grass gave Gone Rural an economic competitive advantage over handicrafters that used non- renewable sisal.²⁴

Production of handicraft for Gone Rural brought about changes in the procurement of the raw material for the Ntibane women. Unlike in the 1980s where the producers used sisal and other natural wild colouring, Gone Rural provided processed raw material in different colours to suit the different products.²⁵ The first group of women was not familiar with the use of *lutindzi* to produce crafts such as place- mats, fruit dishes, baskets among other items. They were therefore trained by the Gone Rural. The training involved the crafting of different designs using different colours of the *lutindzi* grass.²⁶ After the five members had received training from Gone Rural, they invited other women to attend a training workshop. The invitation that was opened to every member of the community to attend the training in 1994 was received with enthusiasm by a considerable number of women in Lavumisa 1. With reference to the women’s positive attitude towards new material and weaving techniques, Salafina Gina stated that:

We were taken to Malkerns to be taught on how to make all the products we were used to but then using different material, the *lutindzi* grass. Transition from sisal products to using grass saved us time and labour as we no longer had to go around

²² For purposes of this paper, “globalization” refers to a market dominated by NGOs and Transnational National Corporations. Gone Rural is a member of the World Fair Trade Organization. The concept, “masscraft” is borrowed from Jonathan Stockland’s (1978; 365) .

²³ Unpublished document about the origin and operations of Gone Rural. In Lavumisa area alone, Gone Rural established three women’s handicraft groups, one at Ntibane (Lavumisa 1), and another at Etjeni (Lavumisa 2) and the third one at Ngwavuma (Lavumisa 3). By 2010 Gone Rural had about thirteen different groups with an average of seventy members each involved in different craft designs across the country.

²⁴ Unpublished pamphlet about the origins and operations of Gone Rural.

²⁵ Unpublished pamphlet about the origins and operations of Gone Rural.

²⁶ Interview with Salafina Gina.

looking for sisal plants and processing. The raw material was supplied to us ready in different colours. Our task was just to craft the required product.²⁷

The coiling technique was not alien to most of the Lavumisa 1 handicraft women, but *lutindzi* grass in different colours and designs recommended by Gone Rural was something new to them. In some cases basketry was characterized by division of labour. The trained women monitored their child labourers closely so that they would not compromise the quality of the products. The trained women were the principal weavers. During the actual weaving, the principal weaver did the 'planting', whereby the trained weaver set up the first few lines of the base of the product so that the assistants could take from there until near completion. The finishing was always done by the principal weaver.

Most of the members who joined in 1995 gave different reasons for joining the group.²⁸ Reasons advanced by some of the members who joined in 1995 included desertion by their husbands. The profits accrued to the first thirty- nine members became an incentive for other Ntibane women to join Lavumisa 1 handicraft at the beginning of 1996. Some of the members were faced with the harsh economic realities when they became widows. Such occurrences were common among the producers and forced them to make some means to survive.²⁹ They joined Lavumisa 1 when they received the news that the handicraft producers were receiving good profits which enabled them to buy groceries and pay school fees with ease.³⁰ Other benefits which encouraged women to join the Lavumisa 1 included the provision of need- based scholarships to producer's children, provision of health facilities as well as the investment scheme provided for the producers.³¹ Apart from the monetary attraction, some producers got into handicraft production to benefit from the different opportunities provided by Gone Rural. These included the platform created for them by Gone Rural to have a say in the prices charged on their products. Unlike during their production in the 1980s whereby the prices were imposed on them, they were then called at the round table to discuss the prices of their basketry.³²

Economic Recession and the Expansion of Basketry, 2000- 2013

The year 2000 was a turning point in the history of the Lavumisa 1 handicraft producers. During that year the number of producers increased from forty- five members to sixty members. One of the major reasons was the massive retrenchment on the South African mines as a result of the global economic crisis. The economic hardships created as people were retrenched made some of the women to take part in commercial basketry in order to earn a living. To avert the adverse effects of the economic recession, Gone Rural members took it upon themselves to introduce fellow women in Lavumisa community to basketry. One of the producers who experienced economic problems that resulted from retrenchment was Philile Vilakati. She joined Lavumisa 1 basketry in the year 2000 after her husband was retrenched from the South African mines.³³

In the meantime, government programs meant to encourage people to participate in income generating projects urged some of the women to take up basketry as a source of income. In

²⁷ Personal interview with Salafina Gina, Lavumisa, 16 May 2013.

²⁸ Interview with Ester Mngomezulu.

²⁹ Interview with Zodwa Tsabedze, Lavumisa 1, 13 June 2013.

³⁰ Interview with Thembi Simelane, Lavumisa 1, 13 June 2013.

³¹ Interview with Leina Zwane.

³² Interview with Tfobhi Gina, Lavumisa 1, 16 May 2013.

³³ Interview with Philile Vilakati, Lavumisa 1, 12 September 2013.

response to the massive retrenchments of the male labour force in different sectors of the work place in the late 1990s, the Government introduced development programs aimed at helping the citizens to engage in projects which could help them earn a living. One of the programs was *Ekhaya* (back to the land) Community Development Program which was meant to encourage people to engage in income generating projects in their respective communities. For instance, Ncamsile Zwane was retrenched from the Matsapha factory in the year 2000. She joined the handicraft producers because she “was encouraged by the *Ekhaya* program which was revived to suit the situation of that time.”³⁴ Another program, *Tentele Make*, (craft with your hands, women) was advocated in the 1990s to encourage women to engage in handicraft production so that they could help their families financially. One beneficiary commented the importance of the program:

After my husband got retrenched from work, we had difficulty to put food on the table and meet other needs. A program was run through the radio encouraging women not to rely wholly on men for domestic needs but to also do something with their hands. It targeted women in handicraft production. As I listened to women sharing their life stories I developed the interest to also do craft production hence my joining of the Lavumisa group in the late 90s.³⁵

The HIV/AIDS related economic problems also forced more women to take up responsibilities as bread winners. Philile Sibandze’s experience is a case in point. Her husband died in 2003 and left the family poor. Consequently, Sibandze joined the group of handicraft producers in 2004.³⁶ By 2013 the number of basketry producers at Lavumisa 1 had risen to seventy.³⁷ Basketry production was specialized and limited to items such as baskets, place mats, trays and vases.

The Crystalization of “Womanhood” Through Female Heritable Tags, 2010- 2013

With an increase in the number of women interested in commercial handicraft, Gone Rural introduced special tags for the producers in 2010. These tags were contractual agreements between the company and the producers who were expected to produce specific items. The tags were used to distribute the placed orders to the members. For instance the company would know that a certain number of items were produced by women with a particular tag. Some of the producers were assisted by their family members, especially daughters and sons, to reach the target.³⁸ Through the tags, Gone Rural consolidated Lavumisa 1’s handicraft project as “a woman’s project” because the tags were only inherited by female members of the family after the death of the principal member.

Basketry production presented the women with some challenges. They had several responsibilities as wives, mothers and daughters in law in their various homesteads. The weavers were cautious with the way they allocated their time. They woke up early and slept late in order to meet the targets. One such producer was Jabulile Nhleko who had the following to share: “Meeting the deadline for collection was not very easy for us as weavers. It called for us to sacrifice our

³⁴ Interview with Ncamsile Zwane, Lavumisa, 16 May 2013.

³⁵ Interview with Thobile Zwane, Lavumisa 1, 12 September 2013.

³⁶ Interview with Philile Sibandze, Lavumisa 1, 11 July 2013.

³⁷ Interview with Temalangeneni Mohale.

³⁸ Interview with Thoko Tsabedze, Lavumisa 1, 11 July 2013.

sleeping time at times.”³⁹ Sacrificing most of the time on the weaving of the products had a negative bearing on the relationship the weavers had with their husbands and in-laws. At times the issue became so bad that the husbands exerted their anger by destroying the unfinished products. In some cases the men converged family meetings with the Lavumisa 1 representatives to counsel their wives on the importance of family relations. Thobile Zwane was one of the victims. She stated that her husband was against her spending time on weaving than with him and doing other domestic duties like weeding and harvesting in the fields. The situation got worse when he chopped a half finished big basket with an axe. The incident took place two days before the collection team from Gone Rural arrived. She could not start and finish another basket as she ran short of time and did not have extra material. She did not disclose the incident to Gone Rural for fear of having the tag retrieved from her. She simply asked for more material.⁴⁰

In order to cater for women who did not have tags, Gone rural introduced a seasonal intake. Such producers were considered temporary producers who were hired when the demand was large. The temporary producers kept on nursing hopes for a surplus order so that they could get a chance to produce basketry. Zodwa Zwane, one of the temporary producers, had this to say: “We were on the waiting list. We relied on surplus orders but that was very rare.”⁴¹ Had it not been for the restriction through the use of the tags, the number of producers could have increased.

Gone Rural and Global Marketing of Lavumisa 1 Basketry

The marketing of the handicraft by the Lavumisa 1 women was done on the Thursday of the first week of every month. On submission of the products, the sales team inspected the quality of the products and paid the producer the total amount of the items. The producers received cash and the amount varied depending on the orders a producer had. Some of the producers earned as much as E750 (US\$75.00) and others earned between E75- E100 per month (US\$7.00- US\$10.00).⁴² Production of big items such as big baskets and big fruit dishes which were more profitable on the international market were reserved for experienced and faster weavers. The allocation of orders created a discrepancy among the producers. The fast producers therefore earned more money while the slow producers earned less. The result was a gradual emergence of classes within the Lavumisa 1 group.

The pricing of the different products was known to both the producers and Gone Rural. The handicraft producers and Gone Rural agreed on the prices at the beginning of every year. With reference to increase in prices, Thembi Simelane shared the following:

The prices have increased over the years. We no longer get the small amounts we used to get in the mid 90s when we started producing for gone Rural. For instance in 1994 when we started producing for Gone Rural we were paid E 15.00 for a big fruit dish. Small place mats were paid for E8.00. The pricing of the same products have increased in 2010. We are now paid E65.00 per big fruit dish and E 25.00 for small place mates respectively. This showed an increase over the years. I am

³⁹ Interview with Jabulile Nhleko, Lavumisa 1, 12 September 2013.

⁴⁰ Interview with Thobile Zwane.

⁴¹ Interview with Zodwa Zwane, Lavumisa 1, 16 May 2013.

⁴² Interview with Temalangenzi Mohale. The pricing was based on the 2013/2014 scale.

now able to net E400 rising to E1000 per month on my orders depending on the amount of orders I had for the month.⁴³

The prices were based on the quality of the items.⁴⁴ By 2010 Gone Rural had grown from a small shop to a big supplier to over four hundred retail outlets in twenty one countries.⁴⁵

The Impact of Basketry in Lavumisa I (Ntibane), 1994-2013

Economic empowerment

One of the main reasons for the development of handicraft among women in Lavumisa was financial independence. Up to 1980, when women were engaged in handicraft production on an individual basis, not much had been received from crafting but the little they received enabled them to buy the basic commodities for the families. The establishment of group handicraft in 1981 brought some positive changes for the women. According to Mrs. Tfwala Lanyawu: “We used the money to buy things like food, clothing and farming inputs during the long absence of our husbands to the mines in South Africa.”⁴⁶ This saw them receiving a considerable amount which enabled them not only to pay their monthly water contribution but also finance other domestic requirements. Between 1981 and 1993 handicraft production catered mostly for individual buyers. The women did not make a lot of money that time but they were able to feed their families. In some cases women were able to pay school fees for their children.⁴⁷ As Ester Mngomezulu explained:

Joining the Lavumisa group of craft producers in 1983 really helped me in many respects. I have been into the industry since the early 70s whereby I was working alone and targeted individual buyers. Joining the group enabled me to share ideas with the other members. The benefits increased as we targeted a much bigger market. As a single parent of seven children I needed to strengthen my financial muscle after discovering that my husband had been ‘devoured’ by the beauties of the Johannesburg city of gold. Since I started working with the group producing handicraft I had been able to pay school fees for my children who attended school at Zindwendweni high and primary school. I was able to improve the infrastructure of my home. I bought corrugated iron to roof my stick and mud building for my children. Also I provided food for the family. I bought a 20 litre bucket of maize meal and beans from Nsoko supermarket every month. Life seemed normal for my children. They did not feel the economic hardships that

⁴³ Personal interview with Thembi Simelane.

⁴⁴ Interview with Temalangeneni Mohale.

⁴⁵ Unpublished document on the background and development of Gone Rural.

⁴⁶ Personal Interview with Mrs. Tfwala Lanyawu, handicraft producer, Lavumisa, 12 September 2013. One can draw parallels with the predominantly women basketry industry in Botswana. According to M Elizabeth Terry (2000; 129- 130), “Women probably dominate the craft scene for two main reasons. First, basket- making is the traditional domain of women in Botswana and it has been strongly encouraged by the commercial market, making the premier product from Botswana. Second, many rural men have had more opportunities in the formal sector, especially regular contracts at the mines in South Africa. In contrast, the role for rural women has been dictated by societal and cultural norms, with women taking care of their families and working as subsistence agriculturalists. When the opportunity is present, women can produce and market craft products to secure cash income, making this a favourable feature of the craft sector.”

⁴⁷ Personal interview with Thoko Tsabedze.

emanated from being deserted by their father as I tried to provide most of the basic needs.⁴⁸

Ester Mongomezulu noted that before she went into handicraft production she relied on the sale of livestock to raise money for basic needs. The practice came to an end when most of the livestock was swept away by drought which hit the country in the 1980s.⁴⁹ Experiences similar to Ester Mngomezulu's were common among the Lavumisa women craft producers. In appreciation of the importance of commercial basketry Ntombi Mngomezulu stated that:

Had it not been for craft production life could have been very difficult for the Lavumisa women and children. Most of our men and sons were in the mines and it could take them a year to come back. Had it not been that we did some crafting to earn money there would not be any proper home around here. We could have either deserted our marital homes and returned to our original homes or flocked to the industries for wage employment leaving our homesteads to fall apart. Craft production to us women of Ntibane is like our own mine where we make money in our homes. Most of our husbands saved their money through accumulating livestock. They were shocked when all their efforts for years were wiped away by drought. It was then that they realized the importance of our craft production as we managed to supplement their salaries. We bought food and paid school fees. We did not rely on our men for everything we needed in the family but could pay for other things using our hard earned cash.⁵⁰

Ntombi Mngomezulu's experience was reminiscent of the emergence of female-headed households in Lavumisa. Some of the producers invested their money in livestock keeping when they bought cows, goats and chickens, while others constructed brick houses.⁵¹ That was a clear indication of the positive economic impact of basketry on the Lavumisa 1 women and their families.

Social Changes

Handicraft production did not only benefit the producers financially. It improved their social status which enabled them to gain recognition both locally and abroad. This was evident in the community they lived and in the country as a whole. Within the community they were perceived as the handicraft women who brought economic and social change in the community. Their achievements brought to an end the perception that craft production was for the illiterate poor citizens who could not contribute anything to the development of the area. Thoko Tsabendze, one of the craft producers and a member of the school committee, stated that her appointment to the school committee was because of her economic achievements as a handicraft producer. She stated that:

Crafting has made us better people than we were perceived before. This was made possible by our working with the white volunteer and the members of the Council

⁴⁸ Personal interview with Ester Mngomezulu.

⁴⁹ Personal Interview with Ntombi Mngometulu Craft producer, Lavumisa, 12 September 2013.

⁵⁰ Personal Interview with Ntombi Mngometulu.

⁵¹ Personal interview with Mumcy Shabangu.

of Churches. We began to gain recognition in the community as people capable of bringing development in the remote Lavumisa area. I was even chosen the vice chair person of the school committee at Zindwendweni Primary School because of my experience in the handicraft industry. Had it not been for our craft production, no one could have recognized the potential in a humble person like me.⁵²

It was inevitable that some of the Lavumisa women became popular. They became well known through working with different groups of people in the process of negotiating for markets. The fact that some of the Lavumisa 1 women had economic power in the families affected their relations with their husbands. Some of the men hated the idea that women were perceived as potential candidates who could pioneer development in their area.⁵³ Thobile Zwane's experience is a case in the point. She stated that:

Joining of the handicraft group sparked jealousy with my members of my family especially my husband. He started accusing me of spending too much time with the producers than him. He then began to call me names like I think I am better off because I have money. The situation worsened when he took my half finished product and chopped it to pieces with an axe. When I tried to reason with him he told me that I lacked respect and would take me back to my original home to be counseled. I had to hold my peace and gave in to his demands.⁵⁴

The major reason behind Gone Rural's project was women's economic empowerment⁵⁵ through provision of home-based work for women.⁵⁶ The Lavumisa group was one such community which benefited from working with Gone Rural. In 1998 the producers introduced a financial savings account which was restricted to the Lavumisa 1 members. Each member contributed E20.00 per month. The money was used to buy groceries in bulk every six months. The groceries were shared among the members of the group. This meant that the families began to have sufficient amount of food almost throughout the year other than relying on the return of their husbands from the South African mines. The group's financial savings account not only catered for the members' groceries, but also provided loans to the members to do other personal things.⁵⁷ This included catering for funerals in case a member lost a relative. Members could also take loans to pay for their children's school fees and build their homesteads. This saw an improvement in the structures of some of the craft producers' homes.⁵⁸ Like any saving scheme, the women saving

⁵² Personal interview with Thoko Tsabedze, Craft producer, Lavumisa, 11 September 2013.

⁵³ Personal Interview with Mumcy Shabangu.

⁵⁴ Personal interview with Thobile Zwane, handicraft producer, Lavumisa, 12 September 2013.

⁵⁵ For details on NGOs and economic empowerment see Parpart, J. (2002). "Rethinking Participatory Empowerment, Gender and Development: the PRA Approach", in Parpart, J., Rai, S. and Staudt, K. (eds.) *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World* London: Routledge and Sharp, Joanne et al. (Sep., 2003), "Doing Gender and Development: Understanding Empowerment and Local Gender Relations". *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. Vol. 28. No. 3, pp. 281- 295.

⁵⁶ Unpublished document about Gone Rural.

⁵⁷ For similar positive economic benefits for women working with NGOs see Muhammad Yunus with Alan Jolis (1997) who emphasize the economic benefits of the small credit loans Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. In support of small loans Evaristas Mansah *et al* (2004: 26) argue that : "the Grameen Bank and the industry it has created have been a success".

⁵⁸ Interview with Leina Zwane, Lavumisa 1, 13 June 2013.

scheme provided cash to the women at any time they needed it. It brought to an end the need for the women to seek loans from money lenders which charged them interest.

The Lavumisa craft producers' scheme realized its full potential in 2006 after the introduction of Gone Rural *boMake* (Gone Rural for Mothers), a non-profit making organization that operated alongside Gone Rural. The organization facilitated the training of the members on savings and credit to facilitate the smooth running of the Lavumisa 1 savings scheme. helped the scheme to operate like an official scheme. The scheme accumulated substantial cash through lending out money with interest to the members. The members used to share the dividends at the end of each and every year. Doing handicraft and selling to Gone Rural opened up different opportunities for the Lavumisa craft producers. They could afford better things they never thought off when they started the project. The women craft producers traversed the traditional male cattle ownership preserve when they bought cattle using proceeds from handicraft sales.⁵⁹

Gone Rural boMake (for women) and Social Change, 2006- 2013

In their 2005 socio- economic survey, Gone rural found that eighty percent of the artisan women depended on Gone Rural handicraft for their income. Each of the women supported an average of eight dependents. About eighty- two percent of those women's husbands were not employed.⁶⁰ The prevalence of female- headed households culminated in the founding of Gone Rural *boMake* (Gone Rural for Women) in 2006. Some of the profits earned through Gone Rural handicraft sales on the international market were invested in Gone Rural *boMake*. The organization's aim was to assist the women and their communities with educational, health and social needs.⁶¹ Gone Rural *boMake* activities were carried out within the thirteen groups of 764 women artisans within the country.⁶² The introduction of this organization had a positive bearing on the lives of the producers. This was facilitated by the different developmental projects they engaged in which aimed at improving the lives of the producers.

Gone Rural *boMake* drilled boreholes which provided the Lavumisa community with clean water. In 2010 they installed a solar pump which provided water to four taps along the main road in the community.⁶³ Not only did Gone Rural *boMake* provide the community with clean water, but also went into health- related services. They improved the sanitation among the Lavumisa1 women by constructing pit latrines. All the members' homesteads could be identified by similar toilet structures which was envied by the other members of the community who were none members. HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment were some of the health issues addressed by Gone Rural *boMake* in Lavumisa. Beginning 2009, the organization worked with the Family Life Association of Swaziland (FLAS) to provide a mobile wellness clinic for the Lavumisa 1 handicraft producers. The clinic provided sexual reproductive health services, HIV/AIDS testing and treatments as well as all other health services needed by the women, their families and their communities.⁶⁴

Gone Rural *boMake* made substantial contributions towards improvement of educational levels in Lavumisa. Some of the Lavumisa 1 members attended lessons for Basic English and siSwati literacy and numeracy. The tutors were some of the producers who had completed high

⁵⁹ Interview with Zodwa Jele, Lavumisa 1, 13 June 2013.

⁶⁰ Unpublished document about the background of Gone Rural *boMake*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Unpublished document on Gone Rural.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

school. Literate women would not only expand the handicraft industry, but were encouraged to open financial savings accounts.⁶⁵ In fact, education among women handicraft producers and their children created an elite class in Lavumisa 1. This was made possible by the introduction of need-based scholarships for the producer's children in 2007. In 2009 the Organization supported 371 orphaned and vulnerable children. Some of the Gone Rural *boMake* partner donors were the Solon Foundation based in Switzerland, the Stephen Lewis Foundation and other private donors. In 2010 the organization paid fees for 330 children in 66 schools,⁶⁶ and thereafter, subsidized the school fees for the craft producers' children.⁶⁷

Conclusion

This study explored the development of Swazi women's handicraft industry in Lavumisa from 1962, when the first handicraft ware was exported, to 2013 when Gone Rural stopped enrolling additional Ntibane women into Lavumisa 1 handicraft group. In a bid to avert poverty that emanated from labour migration and later on, economic recession and HIV/AIDS, women in Lavumisa took the initiative and resorted to handicraft production as an income generating project in an arid drought stricken region not ideal for agricultural production. The transformation to commercial production was accompanied by the westernization of weaving patterns and use of local, but a new form of raw material, recyclable *lutindzi* grass. Since handicraft had been converted to suit western tastes, it appealed to Gone Rural, whose mission was to promote sustainable livelihoods using sustainable natural resources, but based on a western market that entailed superimposition of western weaving skills, management and marketing structures. Group marketing effected higher financial returns which enabled the women to finance basic needs. The conclusion drawn is that, like in most African countries, the development of women's handicraft in Lavumisa did not only see the deskilling of their traditional handicraft art, but introduced the women handicraft producers to the international marketing system from which they were able to reap considerable financial and material benefits.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Interview with Pretty Dlamini, Lavumisa 1, 16 May 2013.

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